

## Hyper- and misunderstanding in interactional humor.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores two related types of interactional humor. The two phenomena under scrutiny, *hyper-understanding* and *misunderstanding*, categorize as responsive conversational turns as they connect to a previously made utterance. Whereas hyper-understanding revolves around a speaker's ability to exploit potential weak spots in a previous speaker's utterance by playfully echoing that utterance while simultaneously reversing the initially intended interpretation, misunderstanding involves a genuine misinterpretation of a previous utterance by a character in the fictional world. Both cases, however, hinge on the differentiation of viewpoints, yielding a layered discourse representation. A corpus study based on the British television series *Blackadder* reveals which pivot elements can serve as a trigger for hyper- and misunderstanding. Common to all instances, it is argued, is a mechanism of *figure-ground reversal*.

Key words: interactional humor, hyper-understanding, misunderstanding, layering, mental spaces, figure-ground reversal

# 1 Introduction

Recent studies in pragmatics (see e.g. Attardo 2003) have shown a renewed interest in humor as a valuable topic of interdisciplinary research. More specifically, these studies have extended the traditional focus of humor research on jokes to include longer narrative texts (Attardo 2001a, Triezenberg 2004) and conversational data (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997, Hay 2001, Kotthoff 2003, Norrick 2003, Antonopoulou and Sifianou 2003, Archakis and Tsakona 2005). New data from conversation analysis, text linguistics and discourse psychology present significant challenges to linguistic humor theories like the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo 1994, 2001a), and call for (sometimes major) revisions.

Conversational humor, for example, has specific characteristics that have traditionally been relegated to the background in humor research because of the focus on jokes detached from the context in which they are performed. Among these features are the signaling of the non-serious nature of a conversational turn in comparison to the rest of the discourse (Kotthoff 1998), the differentiation of different viewpoints (Ritchie, in press), the interpersonal function of multi-agent humor (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997, Holmes and Marra 2002) and timing (Norrick 2001).

The present paper is intended as a contribution to this recent development in humor studies. With the use of a corpus of multi-agent language use, a categorization of different realizations of conversational humor is presented. More specifically, two related utterance types that are responsive (non-topical) to a previous turn in a conversation are analyzed with respect to the linguistic pivot element on which the response hinges. The first phenomenon, labeled *hyper-understanding* in Veale et al. (in press), revolves around a speaker's ability to exploit potential weak spots (ambiguity) in a previous speaker's utterance by echoing the latter's words with a fundamentally different reading. In doing so, the second speaker dissociates himself from the first by playfully parodying the latter's words. In the second phenomenon under scrutiny, the *misinterpretation* is not pretended. In these cases, a character in the fictional world is genuinely misguided by the potential (but mostly contextually suppressed) ambivalence of a previous speaker's utterance.

First, I briefly review some of the past research on interactional humor, with a special focus on those cases in which the responsive nature of the humorous turn is crucial. On the basis of that selective overview, I present an argument in favor of a layered approach to both phenomena (section 2.1). It is argued, along the lines of Ritchie (in press), that a differentiation of interconnected viewpoints is crucial to the analysis of these examples. A mental space approach to hyper- (2.2.1) and misunderstanding (2.2.2) respectively reveals that both essentially involve a clash of different viewpoints. As a second step, I present a quantitative analysis based on a corpus of 2100 conversational turns in the British TV series *Blackadder* (section 3). These data provide an overview of the different pivot elements that can trigger hyper- and misunderstanding. On the basis of the first and second step, some general conclusions are presented, together with some feedback to linguistic humor theories.

## 2 Interactional aspects of hyper- and misunderstanding

In this section, a selective overview is presented of research on the reactive nature of interactional humor (2.1). On the basis of that overview, the phenomena that are the focus of the present paper, hyper-understanding (2.2.1) and misunderstanding (2.2.2), are defined. A layered approach in terms of viewpoint mental spaces is advocated.

## 2.1 The linguistics of interactional humor

The multitude of humor theories developed in more than two millennia of philosophical considerations on laughter and humor can generally be divided into three major families: the cognitive theories that give a central role to *incongruity* and its resolution (e.g. Kant, Schopenhauer, Koestler, Suls); social theories that highlight the importance of aggression, disparagement and the confirmation of *superiority* in humor (e.g., Hobbes, Bergson, Gruner); and the psychoanalytical *tension-release* models inspired by their most well-known proponent, Freud.<sup>1</sup>

The second group of humor theories, which revolves around the social dimensions of humor, focuses attention on the interpersonal, and often adversarial nature of the humor game. In a multi-agent setting with opponents competing in a game of verbal thrusts and parries, wittiness becomes the symbol of intellectual and social superiority. Within this competitive view of wit as verbal fencing or jousting, Gruner (1997) develops a game-theoretic account of humor in which participants can be winners (those who laugh) or losers (those who are laughed at). He argues that even wordplay and punning, often treated as "non-tendentious" (Freud 1905) or neutral cases of humor, fit naturally into the formula of "laughing is winning".

The literature on linguistic humor offers slim pickings to those seeking analytical approaches to the interactional, game-like aspects of humor production (a criticism leveled by Kotthoff 1998 and Norrick 1993, among others). Nevertheless, there are some studies that are germane to the focus of the present paper. Davies (1984: 362) in her analysis of conversational joking styles, refers to the thematic principle of *contradiction*, which is central in cases of competitive humor types (e.g. *ritual insulting*). In one cited example, participants jointly improvise and attack each other within the same joke frame. Typical of this adversarial game is the expression of contradiction through "parallelism across turns" (ibid.), a feature that is essential to the hyper-understanding strategy that will be discussed in more detail in the present paper (2.2.1). Basically, humorous insults constitute a kind of *teasing*, which, according to Drew (1987: 233) can be discriminated from other interactional strategies by three criteria: "(i) the teases are not topic-initial utterances, (ii) they are all in some way a second, or a next, or a response to a prior turn, almost always the adjacent prior turn, and (iii) that prior turn is spoken by the person who is subsequently teased, in multiparty as well as two-party talk". Most important in the context of the present paper is the stipulation that teases are always a response to a prior utterance in a given context.

Venturing beyond the realm of teasing, Curcó (1998) offers a relevance-theoretic account that extends the view of humor as a response mechanism, proposing that all types of intentional humor be seen as *indirect echoes*. Curcó (ibid.: 305f) argues that "a great amount of intentional humor, if not all, consists to a large extent in implicitly making a specific type of dissociative comment about a certain aspect of the world, or an attributable thought. [...] [S]peakers lead hearers to entertain mental representations that are attributable to someone other than the speaker at the time of the current utterance, while simultaneously expressing towards such representations an attitude of dissociation". In other words, if a speaker is confronted with two radically contradicting assumptions at a time (incongruity), the search for relevance leads one to inferentially attribute one of the assumptions to another agent, and therefore dissociate oneself from this assumption. For Curcó, incongruity is not a defining

<sup>1</sup> A more detailed overview of the classification of humor theories can be found in Keith-Spiegel (1972) and Attardo (1994). Keith-Spiegel develops a typology of eight categories in humor theories, Attardo reduces this to the three major groups mentioned above.

feature of humor, but simply a means of invoking the additional processing effort one needs to look beyond the purely propositional content of an utterance.

Common to both Drew's notion of teasing and Curc6's indirect echoes is the construction of a *layered* meaning. Clark (1996) defines layering as the (joint) construction of discourse worlds based on and relative to the surface level of the actual utterances ("layers are like theatre stages built one on top of the other" (ibid.: 16)). Take as a simple example the exchange in (1), taken from Clark (ibid.: 353), between a husband and a wife who are discussing the husband's tutorial work. The husband argues that he is an inexpensive tutor (*cheap*). Margaret's reply ("I've always felt that about you"), which echoes Ken's initial utterance (*that* refers anaphorically to "I'm cheap"), is not, of course, intended as a serious categorization of her husband as metaphorically cheap. It is only a pretence.<sup>2</sup> The dual nature of her tease can be explained in terms of the tension between layers of action: at the level of the actual communicative situation, Margaret and Ken jointly pretend (layer 1) that, at the second level, implied Margaret seriously claims she thinks that implied Ken is cheap (layer 2).

- (1) Ken:               and I'm cheap, - - -  
       Margaret:       I've always felt that about you.,  
       Ken:            oh shut up,  
                       (- - laughs) fifteen bob a lesson at home, -

Clark represents the dynamics of layering three-dimensionally as in figure 1, in which each higher-level layer is dependent on the lower-level one (Clark's *correspondence function* (1996: 357)). This kind of discourse stratification is not, of course, unique to the kind of pretence/tease in example (1). Rather, it is a quintessential characteristic of a range of phenomena traditionally labeled 'nonserious language', including fiction (novels, movies, plays, etc.), irony, sarcasm, overstatement, understatement, counterfactuals, rhetorical questions, etc.

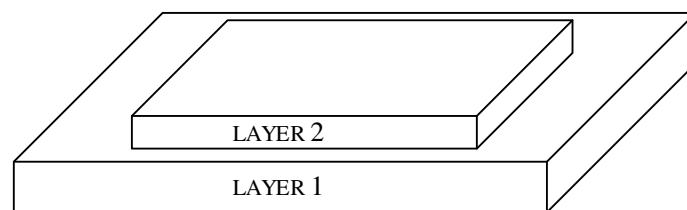


Figure 1: Clark's three-dimensional model of layering

In order to functionally differentiate between larger layered constructs like stories, plays, etc. and single layered actions, Clark (1996: 368) introduces the notion of *staged communicative acts*. This subclass of layering clusters a number of related phenomena common in conversation (though, of course, not restricted to it), including irony, sarcasm, understatement,

<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, the example is a case of hyper-understanding (to be discussed in section 2.2.1) based on the polysemy of the word *cheap*. Unfortunately, Clark does not discuss the pivot role of key elements like polysemy and ambiguity in layering.

overstatement, rhetorical questions, etc. The present paper adds to the list of staged communicative acts two related phenomena, which share with the others a number of features but are not fully reducible to one of them: *hyper-understanding* and *misunderstanding*.

In order to provide a more technical semantic-pragmatic account of the phenomena subsumed under the header *layering*, I will use mental spaces theory (henceforth MST), as developed by Fauconnier (1985[1994], 1997). This theory was introduced to linguistics and cognitive science to coherently deal with a wide range of problematic semantic and pragmatic phenomena, such as indirect reference, pragmatic functions (Nunberg 1979), referential opacity, (counterfactual) conditionals, compositionality, etc.<sup>3</sup> Mental spaces, on Fauconnier's account, are small conceptual structures (small in comparison to conceptual domains) "that proliferate when we think and talk, allowing a fine-grained partitioning of our discourse and knowledge structures" (Fauconnier 1997: 11).

Layering crucially depends on the partitioning of discourse into separate but connected mental spaces.<sup>4</sup> The actual communicative situation in Clark's terminology (layer 1) corresponds to the base or reality space in MST, the initial starting point from which all other mental spaces are construed and "to which it is always possible to return" (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 49).<sup>5</sup> In the case of the tease in (1), a fictional pretence mental space is construed from the reality or base space (the reality according to the present speaker). Figure 2 represents this layered space configuration. The apostrophe after the elements in the pretence space indicates the implied nature of these elements.

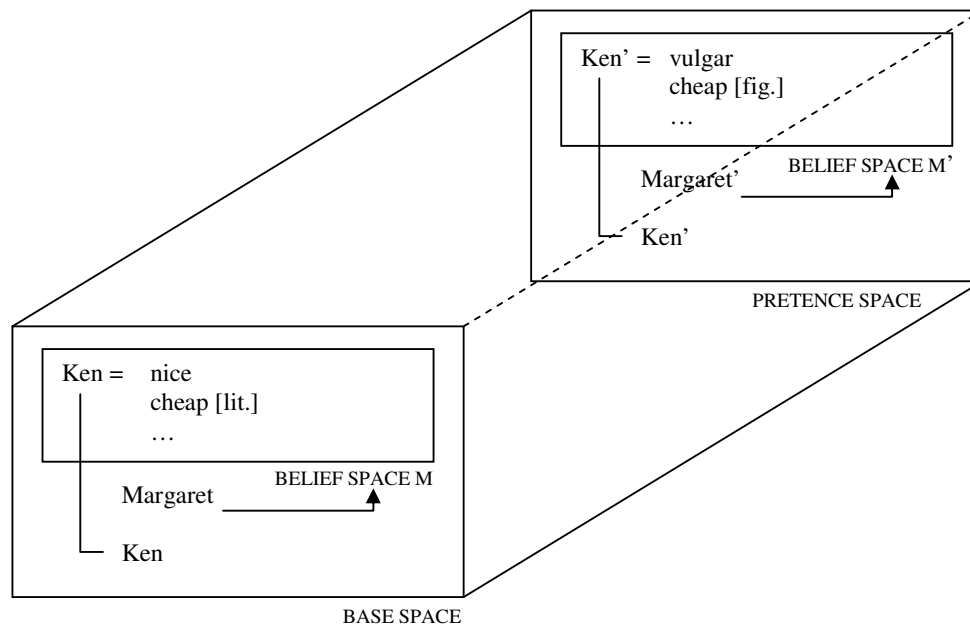


Figure 2: Layered mental space configuration for example 1

<sup>3</sup> I cannot go deeper into any of these phenomena in the present account. For detailed analyses, the reader can refer to Fauconnier (1985[1994], 1997), Fauconnier and Sweetser (1996), Coulson (2000), Croft and Cruse (2004), among others.

<sup>4</sup> A number of publications have presented mental space accounts of staged communicative acts, including irony (Attardo 2001b), sarcasm (Coulson 2000) and counterfactuals (Fauconnier 1997, Coulson 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Fauconnier's use of the notion 'base space' should not be confused with more recent interpretations in Conceptual Integration Theory (or Blending Theory): "On a semiotic account, by contrast, a base space, or a discourse base space, is a representation of the speaker's act of engaging in meaning construction. It is the *saying* of what is being said, the very act of signifying." (Brandt and Brandt 2005: 19).

## 2.2 The phenomena under scrutiny

Against the background of the very selective sketch of previous work on multi-agent humor in section 2.1, which led to the relevant notion of *layering*, the two interrelated phenomena central to the present paper can be situated. In 2.2.1 the notion of *hyper-understanding*, as coined by Veale et al. (in press), is introduced. Hyper-understanding is viewed as the recognition of the subtleties of conceptual meaning. This recognition can be exploited in verbal witticisms to *turn the tables* on one's adversary by revealing the potential weakness of the other's linguistic choices. In 2.2.2, the opposite phenomenon, *misunderstanding*, is analyzed in relation to hyper-understanding. Whereas hyper-understanding revolves around the playful, opportunistic echoing of an adversary's own words, misunderstanding involves a contextually inappropriate reading of a conversational partner's words. In both cases, however, a multi-layered model connecting different viewpoints is needed.

### 2.2.1 Hyper-understanding

Take as a starting point the exchange in (2). The excerpt is taken from episode 5 of the *Blackadder* corpus (henceforth BA, see section 3.1). The setting is the British trenches in France during World War I. The main character, Edmund Blackadder, is ordered to investigate the presence of a German spy in a field hospital. In the previous turns, Blackadder has been interviewing a captain named Darling in a brutal manner (although it is highly unlikely that the latter is the spy). The interview is suddenly stopped when a nurse enters the interrogation room.

(2)

Darling: You'll regret this, Blackadder. You'd better find the real spy or I'll make it very hard for you.

Edmund: (protesting) Please, Darling – there are ladies present.

The second speaker outmaneuvers the first by exploiting the deictic ambiguity of the pronoun *it* and the polysemy of the predicatively used adjective *hard* in the first speaker's threat. By adopting a different interpretation of these two elements than the one intended by the first speaker, the second speaker undermines the first, beating him at his own game, so to speak. The second utterance implicitly parallels the first, but assigns a different referent to *it* ('penis' instead of the idiomatically motivated general reading 'your work/life'), and, in the same vein, he adopts a sexual interpretation of *hard* ('physically firm' in relation to the male sexual organ instead of 'difficult' in the idiomatic reading).<sup>6</sup> Note that although the parallelism remains implicit in the humorous retort (Blackadder does not repeat Darling's words verbatim), the first speaker's utterance is re-projected into the *viewing frame* (Langacker 2001), i.e. the immediate scope of attention, and distorted (alternative sexual reading) through an indirect reproach ("Please Darling – there are ladies present"). The seemingly nonsensical reply is rendered meaningful through the activation of the cultural model of gentleman behavior, which prescribes that a true gentleman should not publicly address overtly sexual themes in the presence of a lady. The stock phrase "there are ladies present" is typically used in reply to males discussing sexual topics. Through this indirect reference point, the backgrounded

<sup>6</sup> Note that even the proper name *Darling* can be reinterpreted in the alternative sexual frame.

physical reading of *hard* is pulled to the foreground along with the alternative referential assignment of *it*.<sup>7</sup> Compare in this respect a similar case from the movie *Clue* (1985):

(3)

Mr. Green:                So it was you. I was going to expose you.

Wadsworth:             I know. So I choose to expose myself.

Colonel Mustard:       Please, there are ladies present!

It should be noted that such verbal witticisms do not merely revolve around the subversion of the first speaker's linguistic choices. In addition, by skillfully echoing the adversary's utterance, one can nullify the communicative goals and invert the interpersonal relations he/she intended (the *dissociative indirect echoes* Curc6 refers to).<sup>8</sup> In the case of (2), captain Darling's threat is intended as a signal of authority (superior to Blackadder in the military hierarchy), but Blackadder manages to undermine that threat by turning it into a supposed homosexual statement (common-sense reasoning with world knowledge that a man who is willing to 'make it very hard' for another man must be homosexual). Within the context of military (counter)espionage, this yields a radical shift in the mutual relations.<sup>9</sup>

The next example (4) shows that the signature characteristic of this type of verbal dueling or *adversarial trumping* (Veale 2003, Veale et al., in press), viz. parallelism, can be explicit as well: the humorous retort explicitly repeats part of the first speaker's utterance. On a different level, it illustrates that the parallelism need not necessarily be situated on the lexical-semantic level (as in 2):

(4)

Bob:                      Oh sir, please don't give me away, sir. I just wanted to be like my brothers and join up. I want to see how a real war is fought ... so badly.

Edmund:                Well, you've come to the right place, Bob. A war hasn't been fought this badly since Olaf the Hairy, Chief of all the Vikings, accidentally ordered 80,000 battle helmets with the horns on the inside.

In the turns before the exchange in (4), Edmund has just discovered that the general's driver Bob Parker is actually a girl. Edmund exploits the potential ambiguity in the syntactic scope

<sup>7</sup> The indirect reference point triggering the reversal in interpretation is labeled the *script-switch trigger* in the SSTH/GTVH terminology (Raskin 1985: 114ff). Note that the parallelism argument does not preclude an analysis in terms of incongruity: "Parallelism is not a substitute for incongruity in trumping, but rather the framing device through which incongruity can be focused and appreciated" (Veale et al., in press). In other words, parallelism constitutes (at least part of) the logical mechanism that provides a local resolution of the incongruity (Attardo 1994, Attardo et al. 2002).

<sup>8</sup> The polyphonic nature of the repartee ties in with the general category of reported dialogue. As Günthner (1998: 3) notes, in reported speech "the speaker 'decontextualizes' speech from its original co- and context and 'recontextualizes' it in a new conversational surrounding. In recontextualizing utterances, speakers, however, not only dissolve certain sequences of talk from their original contexts and incorporate them into a new context, they also adapt them to their own functional intentions and communicative aims". Wilson (1999: 148) argues, along the same lines, that "echoic utterances add an extra layer of metarepresentation to the communicated content, since not only the attribution but also the speaker's attitude must be represented". In comparison to reported speech, the context remains the same in example (3), but the adaptation to the communicative intentions of the second speaker is radical.

<sup>9</sup> On the expression of superiority through irony, see Gibbs (1994), Giora et al. (1998), Pelsmaekers and Van Besien (2002).





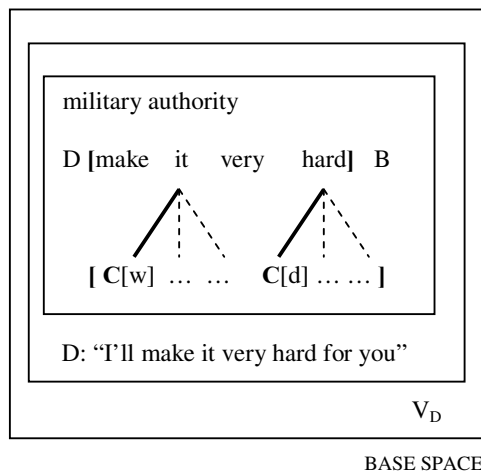
where U serves a communicative goal G

(e.g., G = self-praise, insult, persuasion, consolation, etc.)

- H            Responds with an utterance U' containing an idea X' that is *parallel* to X
- so that U' serves a competing or contrary communication goal  $\neg G$
- U' subverts U and H trumps S to the extent that X' is apropos to X

In terms of *layering* (2.1), the instances of hyper-understanding exhibit a double-layered meaning pattern. At one level, the second speaker playfully accepts the premises in the first speaker's utterance, while simultaneously entertaining an opportunistic (serving his/her own communicative goals) reading that contrasts with the one intended by the first speaker. In other words, in this type of staged communicative act a pretence space is set up in which the first speaker supposedly construes the non-salient interpretation (in that case self-undermining), and which is acted upon by the second speaker. In the case of (2), in the pretence space that is built in Edmund Blackadder's repartee, captain Darling has made an indecent sexual proposal to Blackadder, and the latter reprimands. Figure 3 represents the resulting mental space configuration. Figure 3A represents Captain Darling's opening gambit, 3B illustrates the complexities of the humorous retort.<sup>12</sup>

A.



<sup>12</sup> At this point, the perspective of the viewer watching this exchange is not integrated into the analysis. The reason for this is purely rhetorical. In the case of character misunderstandings (2.2.2), where this level becomes crucial to the semantic-pragmatic construction of humor, it will be integrated.

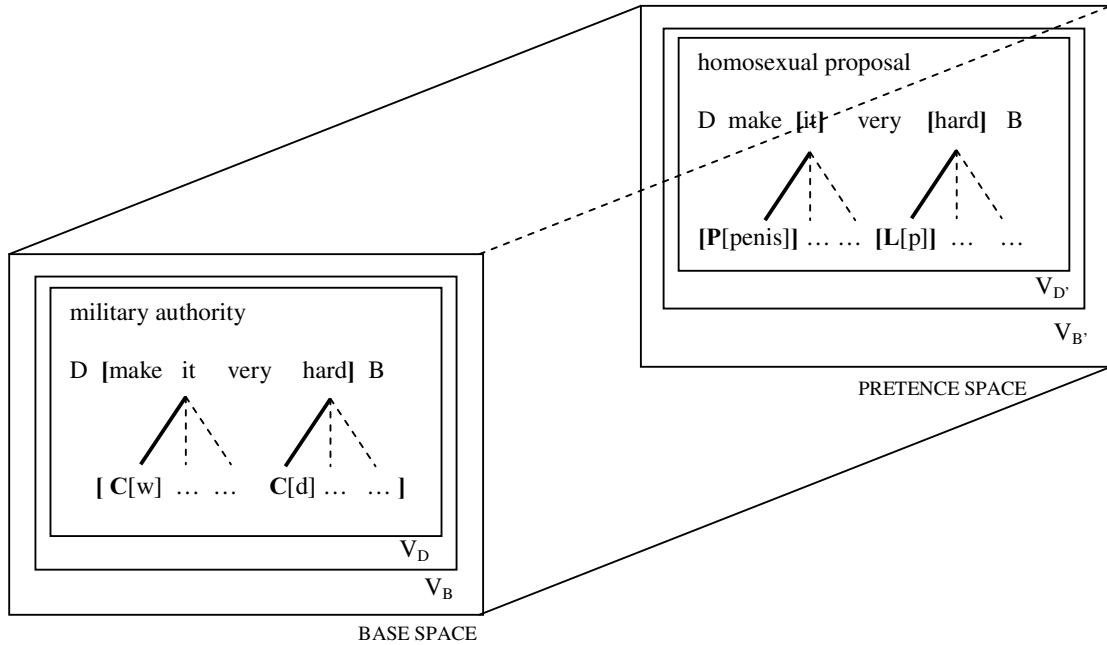


Figure 3: Mental space representation of hyper-understanding

The representations warrant some explanations. Figure A represents the viewpoint of Captain Darling at the moment of his opening move (hence the viewpoint space  $V_D$ ). D stands for Darling, B for Blackadder. The construction “make it very hard for someone” triggers the entrenched (salient) profiled meanings for the elements *it* (C[w] refers to the constructionally motivated reading ‘work’) and *hard* (C[d]: ‘difficult’). The bold square brackets indicate the relative salience of the construction in comparison to its component parts (Giora 1997, 2003; Feyaerts (in press)). Along the same lines, the bold line marks the relative salience of the constructionally motivated reading in comparison to other potential referents for *it* resp. meanings of *hard* that are relegated to the background. Figure B illustrates the ambivalent nature of the retort, based on the double viewpoint Edmund Blackadder adopts ( $V_B$  and  $V_{B'}$ ). At the level of the communicative interaction, Blackadder is well aware of the semantic construal intended by his adversary (hence the viewpoint  $V_B$  with the embedded viewpoint of  $V_D$  corresponding to A). For the purpose of the adversarial language game, however, he construes a fictional pretence space with counterpart viewpoints  $V_{B'}$  and  $V_{D'}$ . Within that counterfactual space, captain Darling construes a radically different meaning from the one in  $V_D$ . In contrast to  $V_D$ , the bulk of the semantic information is provided by the component parts of the utterance rather than by the construction (hence, the bold square brackets around the individual elements *it* and *hard*). The element *it* functions as a personal pronoun (hence P[penis]) referring to the male sexual organ, and the adverb (L) *hard* is used in the physical sense (hence L[p]).

Section 3.2 will further explore the spectrum of hyper-understanding through a quantitative and qualitative analysis, based on a range of key elements (see section 3) that are prototypically exploited for adversarial purposes in the *Blackadder* corpus (henceforth BA corpus). First, however, the opposite (counterpart) of hyper-understanding, *misunderstanding* needs to be situated in the light of the present discussion.

### 2.2.2 Misunderstanding

Within the social, superiority-based view on humor (cf. 2.1), any form of (pragmatic) misunderstanding of one of the participants in a conversation can become the source of superiority feelings in the other (participants). Consider the exchange in (6), taken from the BA corpus. The scene describes Edmund Blackadder, George and Baldrick leaving the British trenches and going into no man's land. George is holding a military map:

(6)

Edmund: Now, where the hell are we?

George: Well, it's difficult to say, we appear to have crawled into an area marked with mushrooms.

Edmund: [patiently] What do those symbols denote?

George: Pfff. That we're in a field of mushrooms?

Edmund: Lieutenant, that is a military map, it is unlikely to list interesting flora and fungi. Look at the key and you'll discover that those mushrooms aren't for picking.

George: Good Lord, you're quite right sir, it says "mine". So, these mushrooms must belong to the man who made the map.

Edmund: Either that, or we're in the middle of a mine-field.

Baldrick: Oh dear.

George: So, he owns the field as well?

This exchange involves three instances of misunderstanding on the part of George. First, he fails to recognize the symbolic nature of the mushroom-like representations on the military map (failure to see analogy-based symbol). Second, he confuses *mine* as a noun referring to a weapon with its homonymic counterpart *mine* as a possessive pronoun, and infers that the mushrooms (misunderstanding 1) must belong to the map maker (through a deictic shift, *infra*<sup>13</sup>). In other words, George construes an obviously wrong causal inference on the basis of Edmund's indirect insult in the previous turn ("those mushrooms are not for picking") through homonymic confusion. And third, he misconstrues Edmund's sarcastic statement ("Either that, or we're in the middle of a mine-field") on the basis of the near-homonymy between the lexical element *mine-field* and the possessive construction *my field*, and concludes that the man who drew the map (the deictic shift in misunderstanding 2) must own the field (misunderstanding 3) as well as the mushrooms (misunderstanding 1).

Note that in two instances, Edmund's reply to George's misunderstandings reveals markers of contempt, indicating awareness of the misunderstanding and hence relative superiority. In the first case, a seemingly objective open question indicating the misconception ("what do these symbols denote?") is couched in a marked intonation ('ironic tone of voice', Kreuz and Roberts 1995). Also, in Edmund's following turn, he ironically echoes George's words by referring to 'those mushrooms'. In the second case, Edmund uses a

<sup>13</sup> As developed in *deictic shift theory* (see the collection of papers in Duchan, Bruder and Hewitt (1995)).

sarcastic construction (“Either that, or we’re in the middle of a mine-field”) to correct George’s obvious mistake.

The canonical type of a humorous text is a linear joke consisting of the body of the text priming an initial reading and a punch line forcing the reader to perform a switch to a different interpretation that is compatible with both the body of the text and the punch line (Raskin’s notion of a script switch). However, an example like (6) does not involve the kind of garden-path phenomenon you find in stock examples like (7). Rather, a character and not the reader/viewer is misled by a (highly unlikely) ambiguity, either linguistic (misunderstandings 2 and 3) or other (mis. 1). The opposition in that case is not between an initial reading and a joke reading but rather between a salient reading (as adopted by the reader/viewer/other participants) and a non-salient (incongruous) reading by the misunderstanding character/participant.<sup>14</sup>

(7)

Q: Arnold Schwarzenegger has a long one, Michael J. Fox has a short one, Madonna doesn’t have one, and the Pope has one but doesn’t use his any more. What is it?

A: A last name

To my knowledge, there is only one study in the field of linguistics that differentiates between the different levels at which the misguidedness can be situated. Ritchie (in press) uses the notion of *nested viewpoints* to account for the stratification involved in these cases. Before I return to my initial example from the BA corpus, I will briefly present an example from Ritchie’s study (8) that illustrates his point:

(8)

"Is the doctor at home?", the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No", the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in" (originally discussed in Raskin 1985).

The joke in (8) has been described in linguistic humor research ad nauseam in terms of the script switch it demands on the part of the joke reader/hearer (from the script of a DOCTOR’S VISIT to that of an ADULTEROUS RELATIONSHIP)<sup>15</sup>. Ritchie notes, however, that it is crucial to represent the wife-character’s belief sets in comparison to the reader’s/hearer’s (and or other participants’) initial viewpoint of the same events. It is the awareness of the audience that a story-character adopts a different interpretation of an event within the story world from the one projected by the audience that is crucial for the humorous effect. This difference in viewpoints is represented in a way similar to the layered approach advocated for hyper-understanding (2.2.1). Figure 4 is a visualization of example (8), taken from Ritchie’s paper. The difference in representation between figure 3 and 4 is non-essential: Ritchie represents subordinate viewpoints as nested mental spaces, while I adopted a three-dimensional diagram. For the rest of this section, I will further adopt Ritchie’s model.

<sup>14</sup> Although the example is not couched in the linear structure of reader expectations being violated and the reconstruction of a (at least locally) coherent interpretation, there is still a crucial opposition between the different readings.

<sup>15</sup> I will not review Raskin’s analysis of this example (see Raskin 1985: 117-127). It suffices to repeat Ritchie’s remark that an account in terms of viewpoint differences does not preclude a script-based approach.

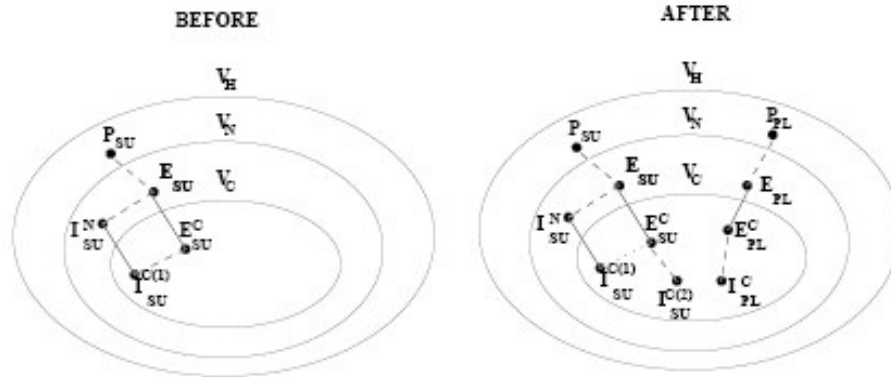


Figure 4: Clash of viewpoints in example (8) (Ritchie, in press)

The representation is divided into a BEFORE and an AFTER configuration to illustrate the clash in perspectives that becomes apparent at encountering the punch line. In general, the hearer has a view of the narrative story world ( $V_N$ ), based on a number of events and characters within that space.  $V_H$  is the overarching world view of the hearer, on which the narrative world depends. The further embedded mental space  $V_C$  represents the viewpoint of a character (C) within the story world that is set up by the hearer (i.e. the hearer's view of what a character believes).

In the BEFORE situation or set-up situation (SU), the presentation of a portion of text by the joke teller ( $P_{SU}$ ) is construed as an event sequence  $E_{SU}$  within the story world  $V_N$ . This event (in this case, the patient goes to the doctor's house and asks for the doctor) is interpreted within  $V_N$  as causally related to the *bronchial whisper* (the patient consults the doctor concerning a sore throat). This interpretation is represented as  $I_{SU}^N$ . The dashed lines represent links to interpretations. At a third level, the crucial story-character's viewpoint (the doctor's wife) is activated, as belonging to  $V_N$  (which means that it is essentially the hearer's view on what the character's view might be). Within the character's view, there is a counterpart (indicated by the solid line)  $E_{SU}^C$  of the event  $E_{SU}$ . This represents the doctor's wife's view of the events in  $V_N$ . The same goes for the counterpart interpretation  $I_{SU}^{C(1)}$  of  $I_{SU}^N$ . As a default, the hearer expects the characters in the story to assume the same (salient) interpretation as the hearer in  $I_{SU}^N$ .

On encountering the punch line text ( $P_{PL}$ , in which PL stands for punch line) in the AFTER configuration, the reader construes the narrative event(s)  $E_{PL}$ . The crucial difference between the BEFORE and AFTER configuration resides in the hearer's view of the wife's interpretation of the events. Instead of the initially assumed interpretation  $I_{SU}^{C(1)}$  (which was actually the projection of the hearer's own salient interpretation) the alternative, sexually motivated interpretation  $I_{SU}^{C(2)}$  of  $E_{SU}^C$  appears.

Although Ritchie's analysis is couched in a slightly different terminology and illustrated using a different representation of mental spaces (the nested viewpoints), there is a clear analogy to my own account of hyper-understanding in 2.2.1. In both cases, there is a clash between different belief spaces. In the case of hyper-understanding, the clash is between the first speaker's intended interpretation and the interpretation that is playfully imposed on him/her by the second speaker. In the case of misunderstanding, the clash is between the interpretation the hearer would expect a story character to adopt (on the basis of (con)textual cues) and the interpretation the latter actually adopts.

Combining Ritchie's insights with the account developed thus far in the present paper, the different steps in the chain of misunderstandings in (6) can be represented schematically. This representation calls for some additional remarks. First, it should be noted that in contrast to Ritchie's example in (7), there is not a straightforward linear ordering in a BEFORE and AFTER configuration. Rather, the viewer is immediately confronted with an obvious error on the part of George, without a clear set-up phase priming the MINE reading of the 'mushrooms'.<sup>16</sup> I will avoid the (essentially psychological) discussion of the temporal primacy of one reading over the other and simply refer to the two readings as the contextually salient one (corresponding to the viewers' interpretation) and the misinterpreted one (George's). Second, although I am aware of the importance of the distinction between presentation ( $P_{SU}$ ), the event-sequence in the narrative space ( $E_{SU}$ ) and the resulting interpretation ( $I_{SU}^N$ ), I will focus only on the latter two in the representation in figure 5. And third, Ritchie's example does not present a straightforward misunderstanding on the part of the wife-character, but rather a clash between hearer-expectations (on the basis of the saliently activated DOCTOR VISIT script) and character behavior (see Ritchie for discussion). As the following analysis shows, however, this difference seems irrelevant from the perspective of the semantic-pragmatic construal.

Figures 5A and 5B represent the initial misunderstanding in (6). Figure 5A illustrates how the strong contextual embedding in a military setting guides the interpretation of the element  $E\Omega$  (the mushroom-like ( $\Omega$ ) representations on the military map  $E_M$ ) in the viewpoint of the viewer ( $V_V$ ). The bold dashed square labeled MILITARY indicates the prominence of the military frame. The dashed arrow represents the interpretation of  $E\Omega$  to  $I_{MI}$  (MI stands for mine) through a relationship of analogy ('the explosion of a mine resembles the form of a mushroom'). Figure B contrasts to that perspective the viewpoint of George ( $V_{C(G)}$ ), whose interpretation of  $E\Omega$  (in fact the counterpart element  $E^{C(G)}\Omega$  in  $V_{C(G)}$ ) is radically different from the viewer's. In contrast to the analogy-based interpretation  $I_{MI}$ , George construes the interpretation  $I_{MU}^{C(G)}$  (where MU stands for mushroom), based on the contextually non-salient (hence the less prominent status of the MILITARY frame) *representation function* (Fauconnier 1985[1994]). In George's viewpoint, the military context priming the salient interpretation remains on the background.

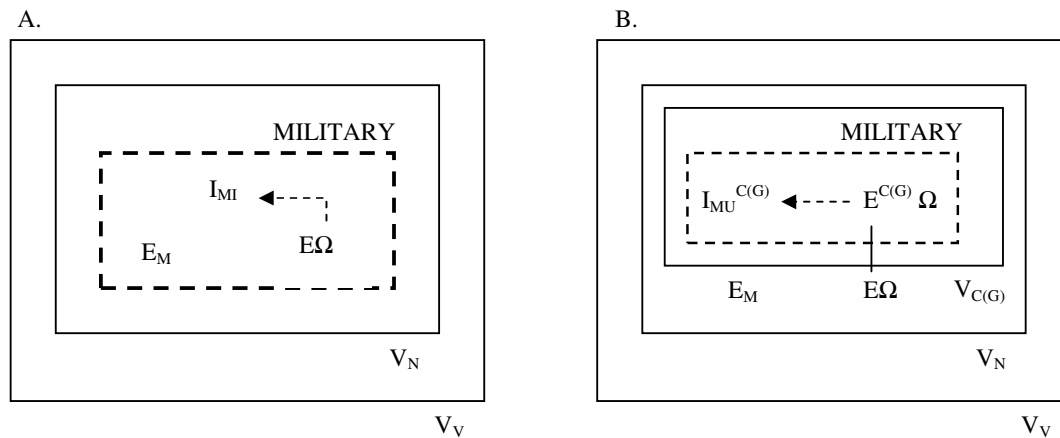


Figure 5: Initial misunderstanding in example (6)

<sup>16</sup> Note that although the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH, Attardo 1994, 2001a) does not systematically deal with the issue of viewpoints, it does list 'obvious error' and 'faulty reasoning' as so-called *logical mechanisms* (LM). LMs are defined as schematized/entrenched (abductive) inferential patterns that provide a local resolution of an incongruity.

The second instance of misunderstanding, George's infelicitous inference on the basis of the homonymy of *mine*, builds on the initial misunderstanding represented in fig. 5B. Figure 6A represents Edmund's insult preceding that misunderstanding ("Look at the key and you'll discover that those mushrooms aren't for picking").  $V_{C(B)}$  represents Blackadder's viewpoint. By echoing George's reference to *mushrooms* (hence the embedded viewpoint  $V_{C(G)}$  in  $V_{C(B)}$ ), Edmund ironically signals that he does not agree with George's  $I_{MU}^{C(G)}$ . In other words, he reveals the inappropriateness of  $I_{MU}^{C(G)}$  in comparison to  $I_{MI}^{C(B)}$  by setting up a local pretence space in which he playfully adopts George's interpretation, while simultaneously repudiating that interpretation: "these so-called 'mushrooms' ( $I_{MU}^{C(G)}$ ) are not for picking because they are mines ( $I_{MI}^{C(B)}$ )".

In the following misinterpretation (fig. 6B), George fails to see the ironic nature of Edmund's reference to *mushrooms* and infers the (incorrect) meaning of *mine* on the basis of his original misinterpretation ( $I_{MU}^{C(G)}$ ). This is represented in the left-hand side of figure 6B. The discourse marker "You're quite right, sir" signals agreement, but from the following causal inference ("the mushrooms must belong to the man who made the map"), it needs to be concluded that the agreement is not based on the ironical interpretation of Edmund's previous turn, but rather on the supposed 'sincere' reading  $I_{MU}$ . The misunderstanding of Edmund's illocution is represented in fig. 6B through the embedded viewpoint space  $V_{C(B)}$ , Blackadder's supposed viewpoint according to George. This viewpoint holds the wrongfully attributed reading  $I_{MU}^{C(B)}$ .<sup>17</sup> This misguided attribution of the wrong interpretation to Edmund is indicated by the double counterpart relation between  $I_{MU}^{C(G)}$  and  $I_{MU}^{C(B)}$ , which only holds from viewpoint  $V_{C(G)}$ , of course.

Along the same lines, the element *mine* (represented as the phonetic realization  $E_{/MINE/}$  in  $V_N$ ) leads to a different interpretation in the viewpoint of the hearer and that of George (right-hand side of figure 6B). In  $V_N$ , the phonetic realization  $E_{/MINE/}$  is linked to the salient interpretation  $I_{MI}$ , to yield a coherent reading. George, however, profiles the element of MAP MAKER ( $E_{MM}$ ), which is linked through a metonymic relation to the element MAP ( $E_M$ ) (contiguous relationship between PRODUCER and PRODUCT).<sup>18</sup> Through that metonymic link, George misinterprets the element  $E_{/MINE/}$  by shifting the deictic centre to that of the map maker (hence the embedded viewpoint space  $V_{C(MM)}$ , the viewpoint of the map maker according to George). From that perspective,  $E_{/MINE/}$  can receive a (marginally) coherent interpretation as a possessive pronoun (the interpretation  $I_{PP}^{C(G)}$  George has activated in  $V_{C(G)}$ ). The dotted triangle in  $V_{C(MM)}$  represents the possessive relationship George construes between the map maker ( $E_{MM}^{C(MM)}$ ) and the 'mushrooms' ( $I_{MU}^{C(MM)}$ ), as expressed by the element  $E_{/MINE/}$  with interpretation  $I_{PP}^{C(MM)}$ . The double lines indicate the wrongly assumed counterpart relations between George's own interpretation of the elements  $E_{/MINE/}$  and that of the implied character of the map maker ( $V_{C(MM)}$ ).

The third misinterpretation in (6), based on the near-homonymy of *minefield* and *my field* builds on the previous misunderstandings. Since no new elements are presented to the existing viewpoints represented in figures 6A and B (except for the previously backgrounded element MINEFIELD), no new schematic representation is presented. It suffices to note that the possessive relationship between the implied map maker ( $E_{MM}^{C(MM)}$ ) and the 'mushrooms' ( $I_{MU}^{C(MM)}$ ), as construed by George (fig. 6B), is extended to the field as a whole.

<sup>17</sup> According to the *default principle* (Ritchie, in press), readers assume that characters automatically adopt a similar interpretation of the elements in the scene (verbal and non-verbal), unless there is strong evidence to the contrary. This example obtains its humorous effect in part through the hard-headed assumption by George that others share his interpretation, despite the clear signaling by Edmund that he does not share George's view.

<sup>18</sup> Note that the element MAP should be represented as element  $E_M$  with an interpretation  $I_M$  from the viewpoint  $V_N$  onward. However, since there is no substantial contrast in the interpretation of this element in the different viewpoints, I will only represent it once in  $V_N$ .

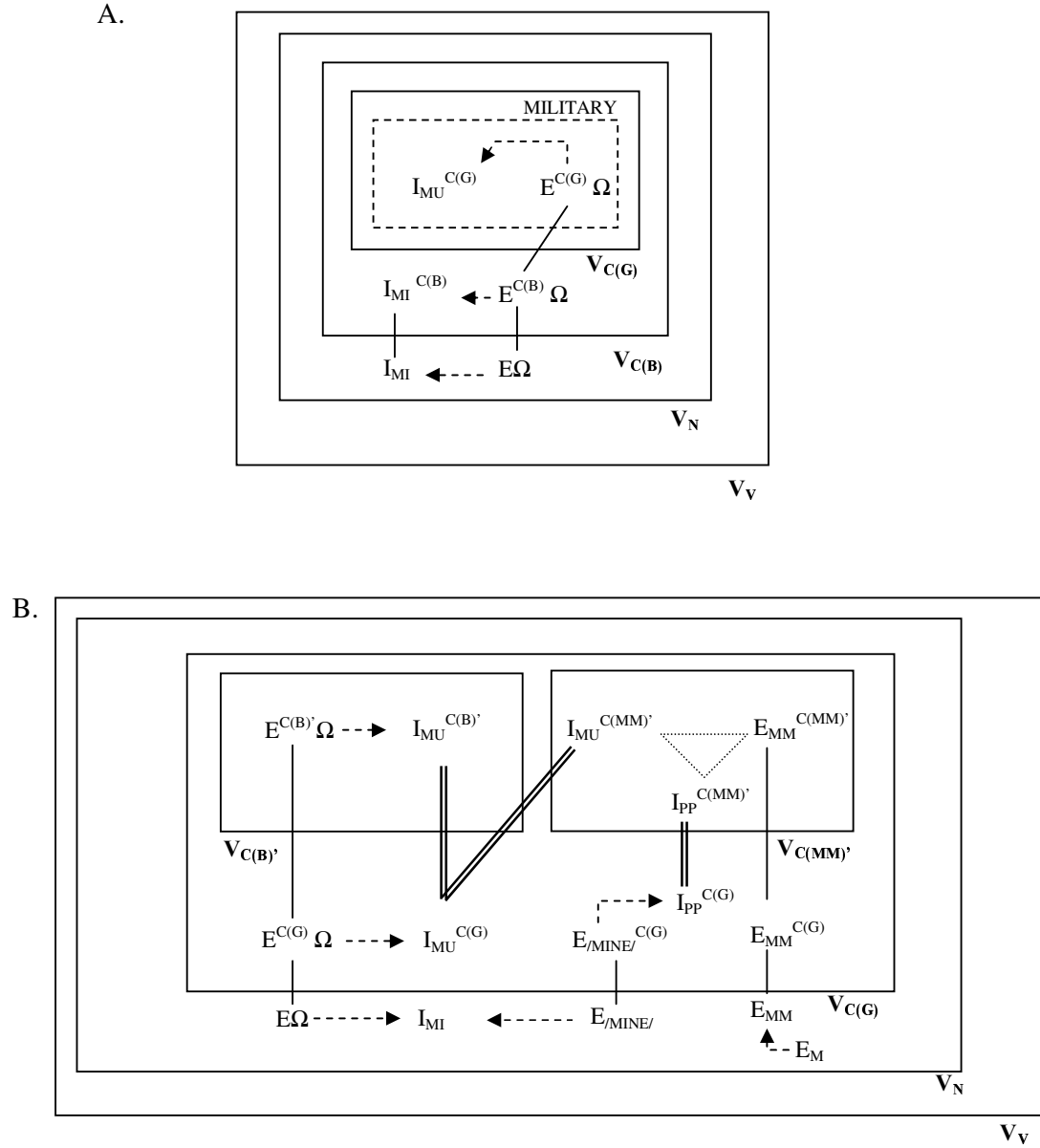


Figure 6: Mental space representation of sarcasm (6A) and misunderstanding (6B) in example (6)

Section 3.3 will deal extensively with the different linguistic levels at which misunderstandings can be situated (the details of which are not treated in Ritchie's pilot study). Parallel to the case of hyper-understanding, an analysis is presented of the different key elements that trigger misunderstandings.

On the basis of this descriptive-introductory section, it can be concluded that phenomena like hyper-understanding and misunderstanding require a layered analytical model that can account for the clash of viewpoints involved. Hyper-understanding involves the skilful subversion of another participant's viewpoint by reflecting (parts of) his/her utterance and



simultaneously assigning a radically different interpretation to that echoed utterance. In doing so, the verbal 'aggressor' communicates the superiority of his/her own viewpoint to that of the other participant who is trumped. In the case of misunderstanding, the viewpoint clash is between that of a character in the narrative space and the hearer's own interpretation (and/or that of other characters in the narrative world). Hence, it could be argued that recognizing the humorous potential of a misunderstanding presupposes hyper-understanding on the part of the outsider (hearer/viewer). What different elements are exploited for the purpose of hyper-understanding and are pitfalls for potential character misunderstanding respectively, makes up the focus of the next section.

### 3 Overview of pivot elements

#### 3.1 Corpus structure

In order to provide a valuable account of the different linguistic levels involved in hyper-understanding and misunderstanding, a sufficiently large corpus of interactional humor is needed. One way to access a large set of examples is to work with the pseudo-spontaneous language use of sitcoms, cabaret, etc. (Attardo 2001a). The advantage of this type of material is that it is extremely rich, providing a wealth of data for the humor scholar. Moreover, the availability of visual and acoustic input provides valuable information on prosody, gesture, etc. There are two drawbacks, however. First, the material is constructed by scriptwriters, cabaret artists, etc. and does not categorize as on-line, spontaneous interactional humor. Second, the choice for a corpus consisting of e.g. one specific sitcom entails the danger of being highly selective. Different sitcoms, written by different script writers may use radically different linguistic humor strategies.

For the purpose of the present paper, I have opted for the compilation of a corpus based on the fourth season of the British series *Blackadder* ('Blackadder Goes Forth'). This one season consists of 6 episodes, with a total of 2100 conversational turns or approximately 3 hours of material. Of the total of 2100 turns, 1230 have a direct humorous effect. The choice for this series is partly motivated by the fact that it constitutes particularly rewarding material for an analysis of adversarial and unintentional humor, since the show mainly revolves around verbal duels, stereotypes of stupidity, etc.<sup>19</sup> Given the caveats against this type of material listed above, it should be stressed that no claim is made about the representativeness of the sample for the categories hyper- and misunderstanding as a whole. The quantitative data are therefore merely intended as a general overview. Follow-up studies will have to inquire into both the external (frequency of hyper/mis-understanding within interaction) and internal (which pivot elements are more frequent than others, and why?) properties of both phenomena.

In order to structure the conversational turns in the corpus, a relational database was designed through the combination of a total of 20 parameters. Among these are structural parameters (e.g. coherence relations, scope of reactive turns, etc.), humor-specific parameters (script-opposition, stereotypes, humor type, logical mechanisms (see FN 16)) and semantic-pragmatic features (semantic construal mechanisms, illocutionary force, layering, key elements, etc.). Because the analysis in the present paper is primarily concerned with the

<sup>19</sup> Since the primary focus of the quantitative analysis is on the relative frequency of different key elements guiding hyper- and misunderstanding, and not on the relative frequency of the two phenomena in comparison to others, the comparatively high frequency of these subtypes typical of this series is unproblematic.

features LAYERING and KEY ELEMENT from the discourse-semantic parameters, I will not elaborate on all elements of the database separately. They will be introduced when necessary in the analysis. It suffices to list the possible values for the two parameters (table 1):

layering	key element
fiction	polysemy
irony	homonymy
understatement	near-homonymy
exaggeration	referential ambiguity
teasing	underspecification
rhetorical question	inference
counterfactual	illocution
hyper-understanding	deixis
misunderstanding	scope
	idiom

Table 1: List of values for the parameters *layering* and *key element*

The category of LAYERING has been dealt with in section 2.1 and does not need further elaboration. It suffices to note that since some of the values occur in combination with others (like e.g. teasing, irony and hyper-understanding), one conversational turn can receive multiple values for this parameter. This also holds for the other parameter, which needs specific definitions for some of the values. These definitions will be presented together with the corpus analysis of hyper-understanding in the next section.

Table 2 shows the absolute and relative frequency of cases of hyper- and misunderstanding in the BA corpus. With 152 cases of hyper-understanding (or 12.36% of the 1230 directly humorous turns) and 203 instances of misunderstanding (or 16.50%) respectively, the two phenomena account for a considerable part of the entire corpus (28.86%). However, given the apparent predilection of the *Blackadder* script writers for this type of humor (see FN 19), one should be cautious not to generalize this finding to the category of multi-agent humor as a whole.

hyper-understanding		misunderstanding	
abs.freq.	rel.freq.	abs.freq.	rel.freq.
152	12.36%	203	16.50%

Table 2: Absolute and relative frequencies of hyper- and misunderstanding

In the following sections, an overview will be presented of examples of hyper-understanding (3.2) and misunderstanding (3.3) revolving around the different key elements. For reasons of

spatial limitations, the analyses will have to be very schematic, although in principle, a formal analysis as proposed in 2.2 is possible in each of these cases.

## 3.2 Hyper-understanding

In the following survey, each key element is given a specific definition and is illustrated with one or more representative examples of hyper-understanding from the BA corpus.

### 3.2.1 POLYSEMY

Polysemy can be defined as the association of one lexical item with a network of different but related meanings. The adjective *rich*, for example, can have a range of meanings, including 'wealthy' (*rich husband*), 'abundant' (*rich harvest*), 'containing much fat' (*rich food*), etc. All of these meanings are related.<sup>20</sup>

As is apparent from the examples of hyper-understanding discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2.1, the polysemous nature of words is frequently exploited for trumping purposes. In (1), *cheap* was the pivot element, in (2) *hard* and in (3) *expose*.<sup>21</sup> Example (9) illustrates that next to the cases of lexical polysemy mentioned above, prepositional polysemy can be functional as well.

(9)

George: Come, come, sir, now. You can't deny that this fine newspaper is good for the morale of the men.

Edmund: Certainly not, I just think that more could be achieved by giving them some real toilet-paper.

George: What could any patriotic chap have *against* this magnificent mag?

Edmund: Apart from his bottom?

George and Edmund are discussing the usefulness of the magazine *King & Country* for boosting up the morale of the soldiers. Whereas George waxes lyrical about it, Edmund pretends to "prefer real toilet paper". In order to subvert George's communicative intentions (convince Edmund of the merit of the journal), Edmund exploits a weak spot in George's utterance, viz. the polysemous preposition *against*. In the case of the reading 'in opposition to', the *landmark* (Langacker 1987) of the relation expressed by *against* is typically an argument or objection. In the trumping retort, this meaning shifts to the literal 'in contact with', profiling the TOILET VISIT script Edmund had already activated in his previous turn.

### 3.2.2 HOMONYMY

<sup>20</sup> Especially within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics, polysemy has received centre stage (see, among others, Lakoff 1987, Geeraerts 1993, Cuyckens and Zawada 2001, Nerlich et al. 2003)

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the directionality of the reversal can be both from figurative to literal, as in (2) and (3), or from literal to figurative, as in (1).

Homonyms are words that have an identical pronunciation, but a different meaning.<sup>22</sup> A classical example is *bank*, which symbolizes two different meanings: ‘river’s edge’ vs. ‘financial institution’. In contrast to polysemy, the different meanings of homonyms are not related via a semantic network.

The only example in the BA corpus which can qualify as a homonymy-based hyper-understanding is the one in (10). Note that even in this isolated case, the homonymy is strictly local, as the proper name *Darling* is not part of any conventional repertoire of last names.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, within the narrative space, the two meanings of *darling* on which the trump (“The last person I called ‘Darling’ was pregnant twenty seconds later”) builds, are assumed to be unrelated.

(10)

Edmund: Flashheart, this is Captain Darling.

Flashheart: Captain Darling? Funny name for a guy, isn’t it? The last person I called ‘Darling’ was pregnant twenty seconds later. Hear you couldn’t be bothered to help old Slacky here.

The near-absence of this subtype can in part be explained by the low frequency of homonyms in comparison to e.g. polysemous words. However, an additional hypothesis can be found in Veale et al. (in press), who argue that in such cases “the speaker is not trumped by having his words and ideas used against himself, but rather by having the *sound* of his words turned against him”. This would account for the high frequency of polysemy-based hyper-understanding (in contrast to homonymy), which taps into the deeper level of semantic networks. Still, more research is needed to further corroborate that claim.

### 3.2.3 NEAR-HOMONYMY

The category that I label NEAR-HOMONYMY collects elements that share a similar (though not identical, see FN 22) pronunciation, but have a different orthography and different meaning (this category is sometimes referred to as *paronymy* (see Hempelmann 2003, 2004)).

In (11), Edmund makes a critical statement after Lord Flashheart, one of the top pilots of the British Air Force has been bragging about his sexual life in a rather sexist manner. Flashheart nullifies Edmund’s pro-feminist statement about the ‘Suffragette Movement’ by echoing his words via the near-homonymous ‘suffer a jet movement’. In doing so, he forces the political reading to the background, in favor of the sexual framing he apparently prefers. Along the same lines, Edmund in (12) exploits the near-homonymy between “willing suspension of disbelief” and “[staring in] disbelief at my willie suspension” for adversarial purposes. Note that the change in word order does not jeopardize the recognition of the parallelism across turns.

(11)

[Lord Flashheart, a pilot in the Royal Airforce, has been bragging about his sexual life]

Edmund: I’m beginning to see why the Suffragette Movement want the vote.

<sup>22</sup> I will not further differentiate between homonymy and subtypes like homography (words that have an identical spelling but a different pronunciation, e.g. *sow*, *bow*) and homophony (identical pronunciation but different spelling, e.g. *to*, *two*, and *two*). Also, the boundaries between polysemy and homonymy are not always easy to draw (see Geeraerts 1993, Tuggy 1993, Dunbar 2001, Nerlich et al. 2003 for discussion).

<sup>23</sup> Also, this example does not strictly follow the pattern of adversarial trumping, in that the second speaker does not directly attack the first speaker by echoing the word *Darling*, but rather a third party.

Flashheart: Hey, hey! Any bird who wants to chain herself to my railings and suffer a jet movement gets my vote. Er, right. Well, I'll see you in ten minutes for take-off.

(12)

[George is ordered to do a painting of a battle scene for the cover of a magazine. Edmund features as a model]

George: Just pop your clothes on the stool over there.

Edmund: You mean, you want me... tackle out?

George: Well, I would prefer so sir, yes.

Edmund: If I can remind you of the realities of battle George, one of the first things that everyone notices is that all the protagonists have got their clothes on. Neither we, nor the Hun, favor fighting our battles "au naturel".

George: Sir, it's artistic license. It's willing suspension of disbelief.

Edmund: Well, I'm not having anyone staring in disbelief at my willie suspension. Now, get on and paint the bloody thing, sharpish!

### 3.2.4 REFERENTIAL AMBIGUITY

Referential (or indexical) ambiguity is defined specifically as a potentially ambivalent element in the narrative space. For instance, an exploding sound can, in the absence of disambiguating cues, be interpreted as a gunshot, the explosion of fireworks, a crashing airplane, etc. Referential ambiguity is hence to be discriminated from all other linguistic triggers of ambiguity (from the semantically motivated forms of polysemy to syntactic ambiguity). This interpretation differs from the treatment of referential ambiguity sometimes found in the literature on ambiguity, viz. as the possible reference of a noun phrase to more than one object in the discourse context (see Van Berkum et al. 2003 and references therein). The latter cases are categorized as *deictic ambiguity* in the present account (infra).

The exchange in (13) is preceded by Baldrick making a humming sound for a few seconds. Whereas Baldrick intends this sound to be an imitation of the sound of a Sopwith camel (an Allied aircraft used during World War I), Edmund construes a local metaphorical interpretation ('the sound of a malodorous runt') for adversarial purposes.

(13)

Edmund: Baldrick, what are you doing?

Baldrick: I'm a Sopwith Camel, Sir.

Edmund: Oh, it is a Sopwith Camel. Ah, right, I always get confused between the sound of a Sopwith Camel and the sound of a malodorous runt wasting everybody's time. Now if you can do without me in the nursery for a while, I'm going to get some fresh air.

### 3.2.5 UNDERSPECIFICATION

There is a range of words that are inherently unspecified as to their exact reference to persons or objects. Indefinite pronouns like *something*, *anything*, *anyone*, etc. are salient members of that category. Despite their inherent indefinite character, they often receive a contextually driven restricted reference, which can lead to the type of ambiguity in (14). The exchange immediately follows the one in (4). The girl who is dressed as a male soldier and calls herself Bob expresses her willingness to take up any task in the army. Whereas Bob's use of *anything* is presumably restricted to 'any job/task', Edmund exploits the pronoun's indefinite character to construe a double entendre. The reversal is triggered by the warning "I would keep that to yourself, if I were you", which inferentially activates the image of soldiers who have not had sex for a very long time.

(14)

Bob: I want to do my bit for the boys, sir.

Edmund: Oh really?

Bob: I'll do anything, sir!

Edmund: Yes, now I would keep that to yourself, if I were you.

In the framework of Cognitive Linguistics, it is argued that underspecification is not restricted to indefinite elements, but rather inherent to linguistic realizations. The semantic structure of an utterance is highly unspecific in comparison to the rich conceptualization that is construed from that prompt (Langacker (1987: 98), Lakoff 1977, Coulson 2000, Mandelblat and Fauconnier 2000). In other words, although the detailed context-dependent conceptualization is *analyzable* in terms of the component part of the utterance, it is not usually fully *compositional* (in the sense that the utterance meaning is not fully reducible to the component meanings). This inherent underspecification leads to the type of ambiguity in (15). The exchange is between Edmund Blackadder and a Corporal who has been ordered to shoot him for disobeying orders.

(15)

Edmund: So, where do you want me?

Corporal: Well, up against the wall is traditional, sir.

Edmund: Course it is. Ah...this side or the other side? [...]

Edmund's opportunistic exploitation of the preposition *against* is based on the unspecified nature of the prepositional phrase 'against the wall' with respect to the exact orientation of the trajector (Edmund) in relation to the landmark (wall). Nevertheless, the corporal's statement is not normally considered ambiguous, because speakers by default construe this type of spatial relation from their own vantage point (Langacker 1987). It is Edmund's ability to *de-automatise* this highly salient reading in favor of a marginal one fitting his own purposes (standing on the other side of the wall would make him invulnerable to the shooting) that determines the strength of his repartee.

### 3.2.6 ILLOCUTION

An utterance can be ambiguous with respect to the illocutionary intention it expresses. Hancher (1980) discusses speech-act jokes that revolve around illocutionary force. In one of the cartoons he discusses (ibid.: 21), a housemaid is reprimanded by her mistress: "Susan, just look here! I can write my name in the dust on the top of this table!". The housemaid mistakes the mistress's complaint for a boast: "Lor, Mum, so you can! Now I never had no edercation myself".

The BA corpus confirms Hancher's claim that illocutionary ambiguity is the cause of many humorous misunderstandings (see 3.3). In the case of hyper-understanding, in contrast, this seems to be only a marginal category (8 cases were identified). A representative example could be (16), although it is not necessarily adversarial. George's stock expression of surprise is de-automatised and contextualized by Flashheart for self-praising purposes. The latter playfully accepts George's utterance ("Yes,") and builds a pretence space (2.1), in which George uses 'My God' as a compressed deictic statement ('That is / You are my God') and not as a marker of surprise.<sup>24</sup>

(16)

[George and Baldrick are surprised to see the famous pilot Lord Flashheart enter their dugout]

George:           My God!

Flashheart:       Yes, I suppose I am.

### 3.2.7 DEIXIS

Deictic words can be ambiguous with respect to the specific element of the discourse context of the utterance they refer to. Elements like *here* and *now*, for instance, can have a more or less narrow interpretation (e.g. *now* in "I'm alright now" can mean anything from 'since a number of years' to 'since a couple of seconds ago'). Also, pronouns like *it* can have contextually linked or constructionally motivated readings, as discussed in the analysis of example (2) in 2.2.1.

The exchange in (17) illustrates the potential ambiguity of a deictic element like *it*. Whereas Baldrick refers to the news of the revolution, Edmund playfully profiles a reading within the domain of HYGIENE by linking *it* as a direct object to the verb *mop*.<sup>25</sup>

(17)

[Baldrick has just been informed that the Russian Revolution has started]

Baldrick:           (rushing in) Sir, sir, it's all over the trenches!

Edmund:           Well, mop it up then.

### 3.2.8 INFERENCE

<sup>24</sup> This example is a clear illustration of how different key elements are connected in a single case. Apart from the illocutionary ambiguity, this example hinges on two more key elements: idiom and deixis.

<sup>25</sup> It could be argued that the example in (17) is a case of misunderstanding. Although borderline cases are problematic for a quantitative study, they provide a strong argument in favor of the unified approach to hyper- and misunderstanding developed in the first part of the present paper.

An utterance can trigger more than one contextually coherent inference (although one will be more salient than the other), yielding an inferential ambiguity. A case in point is the German insult “Du bist wohl von gestern” (literally ‘You must be [of] yesterday’), which has an entrenched meaning STUPIDITY. This meaning can be motivated (see Feyaerts (in press), among others) through two opposite causal inferences: the element *gestern* (‘yesterday’) can profile that the target’s knowledge is either superseded or premature. In the first case, the inference leads to the conclusion that the target must live in the past, whereas in the second, it activates the image of a person who has not been around for a very long time.<sup>26</sup>

The exchange in (18) is an example of an exchange in which the inference intended by a first speaker is inverted by the second. The expression “I wasn’t born yesterday” has an entrenched inference comparable to the second one of the German example (NOT BORN YESTERDAY --> NOT NAIVE). Edmund, however, shifts the idiomatically motivated inference (3.2.10.) to the background in favor of an inference that fits his adversarial purposes (NOT BORN YESTERDAY --> NOT EASILY CHANGEABLE).

(18)

Darling: [...] Come on, I wasn’t born yesterday, Blackadder.

Edmund: More the pity, we could have started your personality from scratch.

### 3.2.9 SCOPE

The syntactic scope of the elements of an utterance can be ambivalent. Although syntactic or structural ambiguity is deliberately exploited for humorous purposes, it is most well-known for the unintentional humorous effects in, for instance, headlines. In a study of humorous ambiguity in headlines, Bucaria (2004) identifies different types of syntactic ambiguity. One of the subtypes she discusses, attachment ambiguity (illustrated with the headline e.g. ‘New housing for elderly *not yet dead*’), corresponds to the key element *scope* in the present account.

Example (4), discussed in 2.2.1, is the only case of hyper-understanding in the BA corpus based on this type of syntactic ambiguity.

### 3.2.10 IDIOM

As we have seen in the examples (2), (5), (12), (16) and (18), idioms, defined here in the broad sense of fixed expressions, are among the most frequently used key elements in hyper-understanding (see also Veale et al. (in press) and Feyaerts (in press)). This results in a figure-ground reversal in which the initially profiled idiomatic interpretation is pushed to the background in favor of the originally non-salient component parts (Veale 2005).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The origin of this expression can be traced back as far as the Old Testament (Job 8,8+9): “For enquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of their fathers, *for we are but of yesterday*, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow”. Here, clearly, the second inferential pathway is intended.

<sup>27</sup> Antonopoulou (2002) discusses the relevance of idiomaticity in humor translation, using insights from Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995). Idiomaticity in Construction Grammar is extended to the basic form-meaning pairs which make up the basic units of language. These units or *constructions* profile meanings that are partially arbitrary in the sense that they activate pragmatic and sociocultural information that is not compositional. The relevance of this level of analysis for humor studies is self-evident: “The fact that certain aspects of meaning are conventionally attached to a whole multi-constituent construction can at least partly explain why paraphrases may not have the same humorous effect and why formally similar constructions



The examples (18), as discussed in 3.2.8 and (19) show that different aspects of idiomatic expressions may be targeted. In (18), the trumping retort performs a figure-ground reversal from the idiomatic to the literal interpretation of the expression and construes a different inference (NOT BORN YESTERDAY --> NOT EASILY CHANGEABLE). The exchange in (19), in contrast, revolves more around the analyzability of idiomatic expressions in terms of their component parts. In his reply, Edmund illustrates his awareness of the syntagmatic relationship between the idiomatic reading as a whole and its component parts and the paradigmatic relationship between the literal and the idiomatic meaning of the component parts (see Geeraerts 1995, 2002 and Geeraerts and Bakema 1993 for a model that captures these dimensions). The element *trumpet* in the idiomatic expression *to blow one's own trumpet* can be mapped onto the element "abilities" in the interpretation "to praise one's own abilities".

(19)

Edmund: George! These are brilliant! Why didn't you tell us about these before?

George: Well you know, one doesn't want to blow one's own trumpet.

Edmund: You might at least have told us you had a trumpet. These paintings could spell my way out of the trenches.

### 3.3 Misunderstanding

Comparable to 3.2, this section provides a general survey of the different key elements triggering the ambiguity that causes misunderstanding. For each type, a representative example is presented.

#### 3.3.1 POLYSEMY

In comparison to hyper-understanding, relatively few of the character misunderstandings are based on the erroneous interpretation of a polysemous word. The longer excerpt in (21) is a representative example.

(21)

[George, Edmund and Baldrick are looking at a painting Baldrick has made]

George: Well, Private Baldrick is obviously some kind of an impressionist.

Edmund: The only impression he can do is of a man with no talent. What's it called Baldrick? "The Vomiting Cavalier"?

George: That's not supposed to be vomit; it's dabs of light.

Baldrick: No, it's vomit.

George: Yes, now er, why did you choose that?

Baldrick: You told me to sir.

---

belonging to different languages may give rise to humorous effect in one language but not necessarily in another" (Antonopoulou 2002: 200).

George: Did I?

Baldrick: Yeah, you told me to paint whatever comes from within, so I did my breakfast. Look, there's a little tomato.

Baldrick has misinterpreted the phrase 'to come from within'. He has attached a physical (literal) rather than a psychological (metaphorical) reading to it. In other words, Baldrick fails to recognize the salient reading intended by George ('represent in your painting that what is foremost on your mind'), and construes a literal one on the basis of the metonymic link between *breakfast* and *vomit*.

### 3.3.2 HOMONYMY

In section 2.2.2, I have described at length the homonymy-based misinterpretation of *mine* in (6). Example (22) is based on the homophony between the noun *nun* and the pronoun *none*.

(22)

[Baldrick is posing as a nun for a painting George is making]

Baldrick: You know, the funny thing is, my father was a nun.

Edmund: [firmly] No he wasn't.

Baldrick: He was so, sir. I know, 'cos whenever he was up in court, and the judge used to say "occupation", he'd say "nun".

The exchange in (23) is interesting in that it contains a string of misunderstandings based on the local homonymy of *Darling* discussed in 3.2.2. They are all triggered by the ambiguity between the different discourse spaces Melchett's words are thought to belong to: the actual interaction between Melchett and Darling or the projected conversation between Melchett and Georgina. The different misinterpretations in this longer excerpt are underlined.

(23)

[Melchett is discussing his plans with his date Georgina]

Melchett: God, it's a spankingly beautiful world and tonight's my night. I know what I'll say to her. 'Darling...'

Darling: Yes sir?

Melchett: What?

Darling: Um, I don't know, sir.

Melchett: Well don't butt in! (exhales) 'I want to make you happy, darling.'

Darling: Well, that's very kind of you sir.

Melchett: Will you kindly stop interrupting? If you don't listen, how can you tell me what you think? (continues) 'I want to make you happy, darling. I want to build a nest for your ten tiny toes. I want to cover every inch of your gorgeous body in pepper and sneeze all over you.'

- Darling: I really think I must protest!
- Melchett: What is the matter with you, Darling?
- Darling: Well, it's all so sudden, I mean the nest bit's fine, but the pepper business is definitely out!
- Melchett: How dare you tell me how I may or may not treat my beloved Georgina?
- Darling: Georgina?
- Melchett: Yes, I'm working on what to say to her this evening.
- Darling: Oh yes. Of course. Thank God.
- Melchett: Alright?
- Darling: Yes, I'm listening, sir.
- Melchett: Honestly Darling, you really are the most graceless, dim-witted pumpkin I ever met.
- Darling: I don't think you should say that to her.

### 3.3.3 NEAR-HOMONYMY

Next to the homonymy of *mine*, example (2) contains a case of near-homonymy as well (*mine-field* vs. *my field*).

In (24), understanding Baldrick's misunderstanding requires the activation of encyclopedic knowledge about World War I and the events that led to that war, since the actual utterance he refers to ("I heard that") remains implicit. Nevertheless, the phonological string /Archie Duke shot an Ostrich 'cause he was hungry/ provides sufficient cues to recover the salient string "The archduke of Austria-Hungary was shot" (see Giora (2003) and Giora et al. (2004) for an account of *optimal innovation* as innovation that allows for the recoverability of the salient).

(24)

[Baldrick, George and Edmund are discussing the events that led to the war]

- Baldrick: I heard that it started when a bloke called Archie Duke shot an ostrich 'cause he was hungry.

### 3.3.4 REFERENTIAL AMBIGUITY

In (2), George misinterprets the potentially ambiguous mushroom-like element on the map, despite the strong contextual preference for the interpretation he does not adopt. One more example is (25). George erroneously categorizes Baldrick's and Edmund's behavior as a game rather than sheltering. Typical for the cases of humorous misunderstanding revolving around referential ambiguity is the failure to infer the correct interpretation in spite of massive contextual evidence for the latter.

(25)

[Baldrick and Edmund are taking cover under a table because they think an air-raid is going on.  
George enters]

George: Oh, hello, what's going on here? Game of hide and seek? Excellent! Right now, I'll go and count to a hundred. Er, no. Better make it five, actually . . .

Edmund: George . . .

George: Er. Oh, it's sardines. Oh, excellent! That's my favorite one, that.

### 3.3.5 UNDERSPECIFICATION

Parallel to the account of underspecification in hyper-understanding (3.2.5), I will distinguish between indefinite elements, on the one hand, and the inherent underspecification of actual realizations in comparison to the rich conceptualizations they evoke, on the other.

Example (26) parallels that in (14) in that it revolves around the contextual restriction of an indefinite pronoun. In comparison to the previously treated examples, this is a marked case because it connects two utterances that are separated by several intermediate turns (14 to be precise). Whereas Edmund construes a contextually restricted interpretation of *any questions* as 'any questions concerning the carrier pigeon case', Baldrick sticks to the context-independent generic meaning. This results in the absurd answer to Melchett's question. In that answer he produces a verbatim repetition of the apodosis in Edmund's command, with the exception of the deictic shift of *we* to *Captain Blackadder* for the subject of the second clause, which leads to the unintentional unmasking of the offender.

(26)

[Edmund has accidentally shot a carrier pigeon. When he discovers that the shooting of carrier pigeons is a court-martial offence, he decides to destroy the evidence by eating the pigeon]

Edmund: [...] If anyone asks you any questions at all, we didn't receive any messages and we definitely did not shoot this plump breasted pigeon.

[...]

Melchett: [...] I'm giving you your order to advance now. Synchronize watches gentlemen. Private, what is the time?

Baldrick: We didn't receive any messages and Captain Blackadder definitely did not shoot the delicious plump breasted pigeon, sir.

A counterpart of example (15), in which the trumper exploits the potential ambiguity arising from the underspecification of the actual linguistic realization in comparison to the conceptualization it aims to evoke, can be found in the misunderstanding in (27). Although the misinterpretation in this case is not expressed verbally, but rather in incongruent behavior, it revolves around the specification of orientation in George's request. George's request does not foreground the ORIENTATION schema, because basic encyclopedic knowledge renders this irrelevant. (cf. Grice's maxims of manner and quantity). Baldrick, however, is presented as lacking this knowledge (although, strictly speaking, he does what he is told to do).

(27)

George: Baldrick, put this in some water, will you?

Baldrick: [Baldrick dunks the flowers into the vase upside-down]

### 3.3.6 ILLOCUTION

In a number of examples discussed thus far, the misunderstandings are at least partially triggered by the failure of a character to identify the correct speech act underlying the other speaker's utterance. In (6), for example, George fails to see the insult in Edmund's sarcastic utterance "Look at the key and you'll discover that those mushrooms aren't for picking", and interprets it as a normal directive. In (23), Darling fails to distinguish between the constative nature of the utterances in the actual interaction (the discourse space with Darling and Melchett) and the commissives in the projected interaction between Melchett and Georgina.

The example in (28) is another representative case of a humorous misunderstanding that hinges on a failure to detect the correct illocutionary force.

(28)

[Edmund has asked Baldrick to send two notes, one to the famous lawyer Mattingburg, asking for legal representation, and another to George, asking for a sponge bag. Baldrick has apparently sent the notes to the wrong person]

Edmund: Baldrick, I gave you two notes. You sent the note asking for a sponge bag to the finest mind in English legal history.

Baldrick: Certainly did, sir!

### 3.3.7 DEIXIS

The following example in (29) parallels (2) discussed in 2.2.1, in that it depends on the potential ambiguity of *it* between a deictic meaning and a constructionally motivated one. Edmund profiles the constructionally embedded meaning of *it*, viz. 'the solution'. Baldrick's reaction, however, reveals a different interpretation: the meaning of *it* is construed as referring to a specific DISEASE, so that after Edmund's kissing Baldrick, if Baldrick "has *it*", so does Edmund (causal inference based on world knowledge of infectious diseases).

(29)

[Edmund is in prison. He and Baldrick are thinking of ways to get him out]

Baldrick: Well, I have a cunning plan, sir.

Edmund: All right, Baldrick -- for old time's sake.

Baldrick: Well, you phone Field Marshal Haig, sir, and you ask him to get you out of here.

Edmund: (stands) Baldrick, even by your standards it's pathetic! I've only ever met Field Marshal Haig once, it was twenty years ago, and, ... my god, you've got it, you've got it!

[Edmund kisses Baldrick's hat]

Baldrick: Well, if I've got it, you got it too, now, sir.

### 3.3.8 INFERENCE

As the previous example (29) shows, the assignment of an incorrect interpretation to one or more words in another participant's utterance can lead to erroneous inferences. The exchange in (30) can serve as another illustration of inferential misinterpretation. It is preceded by a desperate quest by Edmund and George for a leading lady in a show they are ordered to realize. Edmund suddenly realizes that Bob (the girl dressed as a soldier, cf. (4) and (14)) would be the ideal candidate. George misconstrues Edmund's intentions by inferring that Bob's services are called upon to find a leading lady.

(30)

Edmund:       What am I doing? (calls out) Bob!

Bob:            Sir?

George:        What a brilliant idea! Bob, can you think of anyone who can be our leading lady?

### 3.3.9 SCOPE

Whereas only a single case of hyper-understanding was shown to be based on syntactic ambiguity (3.2.9), the frequency of misunderstandings based on this key element is somewhat higher in the corpus (9 cases or 4.43% of all misunderstandings). The following is an example of an attachment ambiguity between a salient reading as a subject genitive construction ('the King [Subj.] owns the carrier pigeons') and a marked reading as an object genitive ('the pigeons carry the King [Obj.]').

(31)

Baldrick:       [...] There's a pigeon in our trench!

George:        Ah, now, this'll be it! [goes outside] Yes, it's one of the King's carrier pigeons.

Baldrick:       No, it isn't, that pigeon couldn't carry the King! Hasn't got a tray or anything.

### 3.3.10 IDIOM

One last category, the recognition of idiomaticity, has been shown to play a relevant role in (29). A character's failure to see the idiomatic nature of an expression requires an awareness on the level of the hearer/viewer of the figure-ground relation between idiomatic reading (figure) and the literal one adopted by the character (ground).

Apart from the idiomatic-literal confusion, other types of improper use of idioms appear as well. The longer exchange in (32) provides an illustration of how an essentially correct interpretation of an idiom can lead to a *faulty logic* (Attardo 1994, Attardo et al. 2002). In this case, Baldrick wrongly assumes that the indefinite *a bullet with your name on it* is actually a unique object that can be claimed ("If I owned the bullet") and even construed by carving one's own name. Linguistically speaking, he creates a blend of two levels of meaning: the idiomatic interpretation and the literal image underlying it.

- (32)
- Edmund:        Baldrick, what are you doing out there?
- Baldrick:       I'm carving something on this bullet, sir.
- Edmund:        What are you carving?
- Baldrick:       I'm carving "Baldrick", sir.
- Edmund:        Why?
- Baldrick:       It's a cunning plan, actually.
- Edmund:        Of course it is.
- Baldrick:       You see, you know they say that somewhere there's a bullet with your name on it?
- Edmund:        Yes?
- Baldrick:       Well, I thought if I owned the bullet with my name on it, I'd never get hit by it, 'cos I won't ever shoot myself.

### 3.4 Overview and generalizations

Table 3 presents an overview of the frequencies of the different key elements triggering hyper- and misunderstanding. The relative frequencies are calculated category-internally (in relation to the 152 and 203 cases respectively). The value for Total/key (192 for hyper-understanding and 277 for misunderstanding) indicates the total amount of key elements per category. Since one example can hinge on more than one element at the same time, this value is not identical to the absolute frequencies listed in table 2.

key element	hyper-understanding		misunderstanding	
	abs.freq.	rel.freq. (%)	abs.freq.	rel.freq. (%)
polysemy	47	30.92	14	6.89
homonymy	1	0.66	8	3.94
near-homonymy	25	16.45	21	10.34
ref. ambiguity	22	14.47	58	28.57
underspecification	22	14.47	18	8.87
illocution	8	5.26	82	40.39
deixis	10	6.58	10	4.93
inference	21	13.81	43	21.18
scope	1	0.66	9	4.43
idiom	35	23.03	13	6.40
Total/key	192		277	

Table 3: Absolute and relative frequencies of key elements per category

Table 3

The overview of the various factors contributing to the interpretational shifts raises the question whether there are higher-level cognitive mechanisms at work in these cases. In other words, is it possible to identify creative operations that crosscut the different linguistic levels at which the key elements are situated? One possible candidate that goes some way towards further generalization, and which has been touched upon at several stages in the present paper, is *figure-ground reversal*. The notion of figure-ground reversals (henceforth FGR) was first introduced in Gestalt psychology (Rubin 1915) to account for the perceptual ambiguity of certain two-dimensional representations, in which the relation between what is perceived as the figure and the background is reversible, so that what was originally the figure becomes the background, and vice versa.

In the field of linguistics, especially cognitive linguists have given centre stage to the figure-ground distinction (Talmy 2000, Langacker 1987, 1990). The distinction has been applied to a large range of phenomena, lexical as well as grammatical, including the semantics of prepositions (Langacker 1987, Vandeloise 1991, Tyler and Evans 2003), passive constructions (Langacker 1982, 1987), complex sentences (Talmy 1978), metaphor (Tsur 1992) and even the relation between linguistic realization and background ideological context (Grundy and Jiang 2001). From the viewpoint of that general conception of figure-ground alignment follows that the abrupt foregrounding of what initially belonged to the background guides the reinterpretation process essential to the humour game (Raskin 1985, Attardo 1994).<sup>28</sup>

Veale (2005) presents a strong argument in favor of an extended use of the concept of FGR in humor research. Indeed, the General Theory of Verbal Humor does list FGR as one of the so-called logical mechanisms, i.e. the cognitive mechanisms that contribute to the construction of a *local logic* (Attardo and Raskin 1991, Attardo et al. 2002, Attardo 2005). However, the GTVH restricts the definition of FGR to actual reversals that are literally realized within the joke world (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 303f)<sup>29</sup>. I argue, along the lines of Veale, that an extended use of the notion of FGR can elegantly cover cases like metaphorical trumping, which revolve around the tension between foregrounded and backgrounded meanings of a linguistic expression or the “deconstruction and re-assembly of linguistic meaning (Veale 2005: 4). In other words, an extension of the concept of FGR to the meta-level of semantic structure as such (as advocated in Cognitive Linguistics) may yield interesting insights into the dynamics of interactional and other humor.

The data presented in the present paper at least partially support the extended view of FGR. Across the different linguistic levels, ranging from lexical and constructional semantics (polysemy, (near-)homonymy, underspecification, idiom), to syntactic (scope) and pragmatic

<sup>28</sup> This spatial view of foregrounded and backgrounded interpretations can be linked to Giora's notions of *marked informativeness* (Giora 1991) and *salience* (Giora 1997, 2003). Marked informativeness is defined in prototype theoretical terms: “[T]he least informative, i.e. prototypical, members are the *unmarked* members of a given set – they best represent the set and are most accessible. The most informative, i.e. least accessible, least typical or rather most marginal and most surprising members are considered *marked* in that category” (1991: 469). Jokes essentially revolve around the tension between marked vs. unmarked, salient vs. non-salient, foregrounded vs. backgrounded readings.

<sup>29</sup> The example that is most often used as an illustration of FGR in the GTVH is the following light bulb joke: “How many Poles does it take to change a light bulb?”

“100 – one to hold the bulb and ninety-nine to spin the room around”.

The script switch in this case is between the salient script of SCREWING IN A LIGHT BULB and the locally construed script of TWISTING A ROOM, both of which can be connected to the same goal (change the light bulb).



(referential ambiguity, illocution, deixis, inference) phenomena, FGRs can be identified. These reversals can invert relations between initially profiled literal and backgrounded metaphorical readings (and vice versa), between a salient idiomatic meaning of a phrase and its underlying componential meaning, between a profiled constructionally motivated reading of a deictic pronoun (*it*) and an initially non-salient contextual-deictic binding, etc. In the case of hyper-understanding, the second speaker pulls an initially backgrounded concept in the first speaker's utterance to the foreground because that element suits his own rather than the other's communicative goals. In the case of misunderstanding, a character in the narrative space fails to construe the salient interpretation intended by another participant, often in spite of strong contextual evidence in favor of that interpretation.

In general, the humorous effect of these FGRs seems to reside in the *salience imbalance* between a salient, contextually motivated reading and a marked interpretation by the story character. Giora (2002:12) argues that salience imbalances result from "the surprising discovery of the novel in the salient and the salient in the novel". This double perspective, which can be naturally accounted for with the viewpoint approach advocated in the present paper, forms the basis of a higher teleological principle Giora labels *optimal innovation*. For (humorous) innovation to be optimal, and hence pleasurable, it should involve "(a) a novel response, but (b) such that would also allow for the recovery of the salient meaning from which that novel meaning stems, in order that the similarity and difference between them may be assessable" (Giora 2003: 176). Figure-ground reversals, it can be argued, constitute a central mechanism in the production of optimally innovative, and hence pleasurable language.

## 4 Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have zoomed in on some of the semantic-pragmatic intricacies of interactional, multi-agent humor. In order to get a partial grip of the multiplicity of dimensions involved, I have presented an argument in two steps. These two steps coincide with the two main sections of the paper.

As a first step, I have selected two subtypes of interactional humor that have been treated in isolation, and argue that a layered analytical model reveals strong connections between them. More specifically, I have compared Ritchie's (in press) account of humorous misunderstandings in terms of viewpoint mental spaces with Veale et al.'s (in press) approach to hyper-understanding. Hyper-understanding is to be understood as an adversarial language game in which an agent reflects and distorts the linguistic-conceptual construal of the utterances of other participants while playfully agreeing with them. Both phenomena require a layered model (Clark 1996) to account for the clash of viewpoints that arises. In the case of staged misunderstanding, there is an opposition between the (marked) interpretation of an element E (linguistic or other) adopted by the character in the narrative space, and the salient interpretation construed by the hearer/viewer and/or other participants in the narrative space. The humorous effect can in part be explained by the *asymmetry* (Giora 1991) between the salient hearer interpretation, which is primed by contextual cues, and the non-salient, contextually inappropriate character interpretation. In the case of hyper-understanding, on the other hand, a speaker skillfully subverts another participant's viewpoint by echoing (parts of) his/her words while simultaneously profiling a radically different meaning to those words than the one originally intended. In performing this *figure-ground reversal*, the speaker trumps his victim by revealing the vulnerability of his/her own utterance. In other words, whereas both hyper- and misunderstanding involve metarepresentations (Sperber 2000), the

former involves an ironic, dissociative echo (construction of a pretence space) and the latter often involves the erroneous assignment by a character in the narrative space of a belief space M' to a previous speaker. In both cases, however, the type of discourse stratification revealed through a mental space analysis seems crucial to an account of the dynamics of interactional humor.

As a second step, I have attempted to chart the different linguistic key elements that serve as pivots in hyper- and misunderstanding. On the basis of a corpus analysis of the British series *Blackadder*, I have provided a survey of the various linguistic levels that can be exploited for the purpose of trumping and staged misunderstanding.<sup>30</sup> This survey reveals that a spectrum of 10 phenomena, ranging from lexical-semantic (polysemy, (near-)homonymy), constructional (idiom) and syntactic (scope) ambiguity to more pragmatic issues (reference, illocution, deixis, inference) can all yield potential ambiguities. Although the corpus will have to be extended in future research to include material from other sources, including actual spontaneous conversations, the present results allow for the drawing of a general picture of relevant parameters. To my knowledge, this is the first study that presents this type of quantitative data on interactional humor.

As a general conclusion, the analysis reveals the importance of the metalingual level of *entrenchment* and *idiomaticity*. Many of the hyper- and misunderstandings in the BA corpus revolve around the de-automatisation of (pragmatic, sociocultural, etc.) meaning components that have become entrenched through frequent use (referred to as *encoding idioms* (Antonopoulou 2002)). Not only in the case of fixed expressions, but also in the subcategories underspecification, deixis, inference, etc., this level of idiomaticity plays an essential role. The 'disconnection' of the habitual link between componential meaning and 'cognitive residue' (cf. FN 27) calls for a fully-fledged semantic-pragmatic model that taps into this cognitive stratification as well. The GTVH seems to undervalue the importance of this metalingual level, since the specific wording in which a joke is couched is only a low-level parameter in the hierarchy of knowledge resources that are distinguished.<sup>31</sup> The present paper, however, shows that a significant subclass of interactional humor crucially depends on metalinguistic features.

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<sup>30</sup> If viewed from the perspective of the script writers of the series, one can indeed claim that these levels are 'exploited' for the purpose of construing character misunderstanding. As argued in 2.2.2., this presupposes a hyper-understanding on the part of the script writers.

<sup>31</sup> Only in the case of punning, the GTVH grants a central role to the language parameter (Attardo 1994).

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### Table and figure legends

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